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## **LESSON 3    NATURE AND SCOPE OF SOCIOLOGY-II**

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## 3. NATURE AND SCOPE OF SOCIOLOGY

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### Objectives

By the end of this lesson, you will be able to understand and learn about:

- Objections Against Scientific Nature of Sociology
- Nature of Sociology as Humanistic Science

### 3.1 Objection against scientific nature of sociology

Not everyone regard sociology as science because sociology does not possess all the dimensions of science as it is defined. Most of these objections are of two kinds. First, it has argued that human beings cannot be treated in the same way as objects in the natural world because, among other things, they have the capacity to reason and to make active of their world. The second objection to the positivists' of sociology is that, unlike natural sciences, sociology cannot be separated from value judgments about social behaviour. While the first argument is related with the subject matter of sociology, i.e., human being and their social behaviour, the second argument pertains to the method of study, which is pursued in sociology. These arguments run as under:

- (i) Subject matter of sociology, i.e., human behaviour and social life is too complex, which cannot be studied scientifically. It is full of vested interests.
- (ii) Sociology is too young a discipline to have developed the kinds of laws and principles found in the natural sciences.
- (iii) Sociology lacks scientific objectivity.
- (iv) Sociology has no laboratories to conduct controlled experiments to verify facts.
- (v) Sociology is incapable of measuring its subject matter.
- (vi) Sociology has no predictability.
- (vii) Sociology is not an exact science.
- (viii) Sociology is incapable of maintaining detachment of the researcher from his subject matter of study.



## 3.2 Nature of Sociology

**Robert Bierstedt has in his book ‘The Social Order’ mentioned the following characteristics of the nature of sociology:**

Before discussing the nature of Sociology, it is better to know about the nature of a subject. The nature of a subject refers to its internal characteristics which help one to understand what kind of science it is.

Every branch of knowledge has its own nature. Thus, Sociology as a branch of knowledge had its own nature or characteristic which distinguishes it from other social sciences and helps to understand what kind of science it is.

*Sociology is a science in its methods but humanistic in its content*” by Robert Bierstedt captures the **dual nature of sociology**—its unique position at the crossroads of scientific inquiry and humanistic understanding.

**Focus on Human Experience:** Sociology deals with emotions, values, norms, and the meanings people assign to their actions.

**Cultural Sensitivity:** It considers beliefs, traditions, and historical contexts of different societies.

**Ethical Reflection:** Sociological inquiry often involves value-laden issues such as inequality, justice, and freedom.

**Examples:** Studies on caste discrimination in India, gender roles, family systems, or religious practices—rich in meaning and context.

Bierstedt emphasizes that sociology’s strength lies in applying scientific methods to understand the human condition. It is not purely positivist like physics, nor entirely interpretive like literature—it integrates both to deal with complex, dynamic, and value-laden realities. This duality makes sociology a bridge discipline, essential for understanding social change, policy impact, and human well-being.

Bierstedt situates sociology at the intersection of the sciences and the humanities, emphasizing its methodological and conceptual hybridity. While it employs scientific techniques such as systematic observation, hypothesis formulation, and empirical validation, its subject matter remains deeply human—ranging from social norms and institutions to collective conflicts and ideologies. This dual character allows sociology to rigorously study phenomena like family structures, educational systems, or caste hierarchies while acknowledging their cultural and symbolic



meanings. Thus, sociology serves as a bridge discipline, uniquely capable of analyzing both statistical patterns and the lived meanings behind them.

**Focus on Social Order:** A central concern in Bierstedt's vision of sociology is the study of social order—how societies maintain cohesion and respond to pressures for change. He highlights that sociologists investigate the foundations of social stability through norms, customs, and institutional arrangements, and at the same time explore how these are disrupted by conflicts, revolutions, or cultural shifts. This approach distinguishes sociology from disciplines that merely celebrate or critique culture without explaining its structural underpinnings. For instance, sociology does not just examine religion as a system of belief (as theology might), but as a social institution with roles, functions, and authority that regulate behavior and reinforce collective solidarity.

**Critique of Over-Positivism:** Bierstedt cautions against reducing sociology to a purely positivist discipline, akin to the natural sciences like physics or chemistry. While acknowledging the value of scientific methods, he argues that rigid positivism is insufficient for grasping the complexity of human social life. Human beings possess consciousness, agency, and the capacity for symbolic interaction, which means their behaviors cannot always be predicted or governed by universal laws. Instead, Bierstedt endorses an interpretive framework—drawing from thinkers like Max Weber—that emphasizes *Verstehen* (understanding) of subjective meanings, intentions, and cultural contexts alongside empirical data. This balance allows sociology to account for both patterned behavior and individual meaning-making.

**Ethical Neutrality vs. Human Relevance:** Although sociology aspires to the scientific standard of objectivity, Bierstedt recognizes that its content often engages with deeply moral and political issues such as poverty, inequality, oppression, and power. Studying these issues scientifically does not erase their ethical weight; on the contrary, it makes the findings more urgent and relevant. For example, sociological research on slum conditions or caste-based exclusion does not merely describe suffering—it often raises implicit or explicit calls for social reform. Bierstedt does not suggest abandoning neutrality, but he insists that sociologists must be aware of the ethical dimensions of their inquiries and the societal consequences of their findings.

## Sociology's Dual Nature

The essence of Bierstedt's perspective is distilled in his often-quoted line: "*Sociology is a science in its methods but humanistic in its content.*" This statement captures the methodological rigor that underpins sociological analysis—its use of data, logic, and research protocols—while simultaneously acknowledging its focus



on the deeply human aspects of social life. Whether studying love, deviance, education, or revolution, sociology never loses sight of the human experiences and meanings that shape these phenomena. This duality is not a limitation but a distinctive strength, allowing sociology to offer rich, nuanced understandings of the social world.

Bierstedt's view challenges rigid scientism and opens up space for a more flexible and inclusive understanding of social reality. By recognizing both the measurable and the meaningful, sociology becomes capable of addressing a wide range of issues—from quantifiable behaviors like crime rates or birth rates to intangible aspects such as alienation, identity, and social stigma. This makes sociology uniquely suited to analyze modern societies in all their complexity. It doesn't merely observe society—it interprets, critiques, and often intervenes. Bierstedt's framework thus empowers sociologists to engage with the world not just as detached analysts, but as critical thinkers and participants in social transformation.

The nature of Sociology is as follows:

**(1) Sociology is an independent science:**

Sociology is not treated and studied as a branch of any other science like philosophy, history. Now it has emerged into an independent science. As an independent science it has its own field of study.

**(2) Sociology is a social science and not a physical science:**

All the sciences are divided into two categories: natural sciences and social sciences. Natural sciences study physical phenomena where as social sciences study social phenomena. Social sciences include Economics, Political Science, and Anthropology etc. Sociology belongs to the family of social sciences. As a social science it concentrates its attention on man, his social behaviour, activities and social life. In other words, it studies man as a social being.

**(3) Sociology is a pure science and an applied science:** Sociology builds theories to understand patterns and processes in society, such as conflict theory, functionalism, and symbolic interactionism. It also serves an applied function, helping solve social problems through policy-making, planning, and community development.

**(4) Sociology is an abstract science and not a concrete science:**

This doesn't mean that Sociology is an art and not a science. It only refers that Sociology is not interested in concrete manifestations of human events. It is more concerned with the form of human events and their patterns. Similarly, Sociology does not confine itself to the study of this society or that particular society. It simply means that Sociology is an abstract science, not a concrete science.

**(5) Sociology is a categorical and not a normative discipline:**

Sociology "confines itself about what is, not what should be or ought to be." As a science it is silent about questions of value. It does not make any kind of value judgment. It only means Sociology as a discipline cannot deal with problems of good and evil, right and wrong.

**(6) Sociology is a generalising and not a particularising science:**

Sociology does not study each and every event that takes place in society. It makes generalization on the basis of some selected events. For example, not by studying or examining all the secondary groups but by observing a few secondary groups, a sociologist makes generalization of secondary groups.

**(7) Sociology is a general science and not a special social science:**

The area of inquiry of Sociology is general and not specialised. Social sciences like Political Science, History, Economics, etc. study human interaction but not all about human interactions. But Sociology does not investigate special kind of phenomena in relation to human life, and activities but it only studies human activities in a general way.

**(8) Sociology is both a rational and empirical science:**

Empiricism is the approach that emphasizes experiences and the facts that result from observation and experimentation. On the other hand, rationalism stresses reason and theories that result from logical inference. The empiricist collects facts, the rationalist co-ordinates and arranges them. In sociological theory both are significant. Thus, Sociology is both a rational and empirical science.

Thus, from the above discussion we come to know that the nature of Sociology is independent, social, a categorical, pure, abstract, and generalizing; both are a rational and an empirical social science.

**(9) Sociology is Dynamic and Ever-Evolving:** Society changes over time, and so does the focus of sociological study. Sociology is dynamic, adapting to new realities like globalization, digital communication, migration, and environmental crises. It continues to evolve by incorporating new methods and interdisciplinary insights.

### 3.4 SOCIOLOGY AT THE CROSSROADS OF DISCIPLINES



Bierstedt characterizes sociology as a bridge between the natural sciences and the humanities, a discipline that draws from the methodological strengths of science while engaging deeply with the content-rich concerns of humanistic inquiry. This hybrid nature makes sociology distinctively equipped to analyze both the structural and symbolic dimensions of human life. While natural sciences seek universal laws and regularities in the physical world, sociology recognizes that human behavior is context-dependent, often shaped by culture, history, and ideology.

**Scientific Methods in Sociological Inquiry:** Sociology adopts many tools and procedures from the scientific method. It relies on systematic observation, formulation of hypotheses, collection of data, and empirical validation of claims. These techniques enable sociologists to study society with a degree of objectivity and consistency, lending credibility and structure to sociological knowledge. For example, surveys, longitudinal studies, and statistical analysis allow researchers to track patterns in education, crime, or health outcomes across populations and over time.

**Humanistic Content: Values, Meaning, and Symbolism:** However, unlike natural sciences, sociology is not confined to observable behavior alone. It seeks to understand the **meanings and values** that individuals and groups attach to their actions. Social phenomena like religious rituals, caste dynamics, or gender roles cannot be understood solely through quantifiable data; they require interpretation of subjective experiences and symbolic representations. This is where the humanistic dimension becomes central—emphasizing empathy, understanding, and contextualization.

### 3.5 THE ROLE OF INTERPRETATION IN SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Bierstedt's vision resonates with the interpretive tradition in sociology, especially as influenced by thinkers like Max Weber. Interpretation (or *Verstehen*) is essential to grasp the intentions, motivations, and meanings behind social actions. Sociology thus differs from the positivist stance that seeks only causal explanation. Instead, it emphasizes that understanding society also requires decoding the mental and cultural frameworks within which individuals act.

**Studying Institutions: Beyond Structure to Significance:** Take, for example, the institution of the family. A purely scientific lens might look at family size, economic function, or fertility rates. But sociology also asks deeper questions about gender roles, emotional bonds, rituals, and intergenerational norms—aspects that require a humanistic sensibility. Similarly, in studying caste, sociology doesn't just focus





on occupational stratification or mobility trends, but also on status hierarchies, ritual purity, and the lived experiences of exclusion or resistance.

**Bridging Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches:** Sociology's dual character allows it to integrate quantitative approaches (e.g., large-scale surveys, statistical modeling) with qualitative methods (e.g., ethnography, case studies, in-depth interviews). This combination enhances the discipline's explanatory power. Quantitative methods identify patterns and general trends, while qualitative methods reveal the nuanced meanings behind those patterns. Together, they provide a fuller, more textured understanding of social reality.

**A Discipline for Complex Social Realities:** In an increasingly complex and pluralistic world, Bierstedt's view of sociology as a bridge discipline is more relevant than ever. Societal issues like inequality, migration, climate change, or digital surveillance cannot be understood through rigid disciplinary boundaries. Sociology's ability to draw from both scientific and humanistic traditions enables it to ask not only what is happening, but also why, how, and what it means for those involved. It is this unique position that gives sociology its strength and enduring significance.

### 3.6 References and Suggested Reading

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